



## Greeting

The Humboldt Lab Dahlem was a project of the Kulturstiftung des Bundes (German Federal Cultural Foundation) in cooperation with the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation). It developed new forms of presenting artefacts of the Ethnologisches Museum (Ethnological Museum) and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst (Asian Art Museum) of the Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin (National Museums in Berlin) in Dahlem for the planned Humboldt-Forum in Berlin-Mitte. The experiment began with the question of how objects accommodated in a museum can open up new perspectives on our globalized present. In its search for solutions, the Humboldt Lab Dahlem therefore collaborated with scholars, custodians, curators, and artists. The results were regularly presented in so-called “Probebühnen” during the opening hours of the museum. In this manner, the Humboldt Lab Dahlem provided stimuli for dealing with the current challenges of presentation and mediation that are also posed to other museums in Germany and Europe.

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## Layering Meanings / Teaser

With the project “Layering Meanings,” the Humboldt Lab Dahlem launched an experiment to radically intensify the connection between the presentation of an object and the presentation of the associated knowledge. This was done with a selection of four objects from the collection inventory, which numbers 500,000 artifacts in all, to be dealt with in depth. Andreas Heller and his exhibition team, with the aid of the curators of the Dahlem museums as well as external academics, succeeded in collating a multifaceted and well-researched body of knowledge about these objects, which were then designated their own individual informational space. A wide range of texts, images and films about the provenance of the objects and their museum history, their aesthetics, and information on their usage is thus made available to the visitor.

## Layering Meanings / Project Description

### Information in Extenso in the Quest for Concentration

by Agnes Wegner

Museum objects in general have many contexts – for example those of their provenance, their production and their usage or the history of their acquisition and reception. The question of making these contexts apparent in an exhibition, as well as the resultant impression is by no means a new one in the field of museum work. The question does though come up repeatedly, particularly when objects originate from geographically distant regions and different historical periods, and for the visitor, not (self-)explanatory. Fundamentally, this is the case as far as most of the 500,000 objects in the historical collection of the Dahlem museums are concerned.

Therefore, from whose perspectives and what viewpoints should objects from these ethnological collections be presented? These are questions that are central to the contextual and artistic planning of the Humboldt-Forum. Which is why they were discussed in the opening workshop “Fragen stellen” (asking questions) hosted by the Humboldt Lab Dahlem in May, 2012, and then recommended as a Lab project. Andreas Heller, the



Hamburg-based exhibition designer and curator, transposed the research and exhibition intentions under the title “Layering Meanings.”

### **Four out of Five Hundred Thousand**

Numerous preliminary discussions and a further workshop led to the selection of four objects drawn from different cultures, regions and periods: a Persian calligraphic manuscript from 1900; a Mayan bust from Guatemala that had been added to the collection in 1899; an Indian temple image (Picchvai) from the 19th century and Incan knotted cord work (Khipu) from between 1400 – 1532. The objects are not only drawn from diverse contexts, but the available factual information is uneven or only partially documented and they therefore present a very heterogeneous point of departure for the project. For the presentation, Andreas Heller and his team wanted to make accessible as much context as possible, based on differing perspectives through the utilization of diverse types of media.

The four objects were exhibited in individual walk-in cabinets and their histories related. On the exterior walls, white on black, the subjective and random nature of the selection from the over 500,000 objects was explained; questions about this approach were raised, and doubts as to the feasibility of achieving objectivity were expressed. The interior walls were separated according to category with headings like “Biography,” “Aesthetics,” “Function,” and “Reception.” In each cabinet there was also a table with stools inviting visitors to sit down and engage with the exhibit.

The exhibition concept is explained using one of the objects as an example: Sharad Purnima Picchvai / Temple painting of Krishna worship, Inv.-no.: I 10008, 304 x 296 cm, Painting on woven textile; topcoat on cotton textile, 19th century.<sup>1</sup> The curator Martina Stoye had already undertaken research on Hindu textile paintings of the God Krishna and was able to contribute her expertise to the project directly. In the category “Function” information on the iconographic aspects was provided, as well as details on religious uses and links to Krishna worship. Under the heading of “Aesthetics,” information was given about the participating artists, the materials and techniques used. “Biographical” details were printed directly onto the table: the acquisition of the Picchvai in 1966, its presentation in the permanent exhibition of the Dahlem museums and its journey to the depot where it had been stored for several years. The object’s index card states simply: “M. Chand, New York,” a tenuous link to the now unidentified seller. Under the heading “Reception” the visitor could learn about the mutual influences of Indian and European art history. They could also read about the popularization of Indian textiles as interior design artifacts during the 1970s in Western Europe and about George Harrison’s reverence of Krishna and his world-famous song “My Sweet Lord.” The song itself was played as an audio loop, along with a piece by Ravi Shankar.

The other three exhibition cabinets followed the same contextual arrangement and presented a similar number of texts, but also additional film material: a workshop excerpt documenting the methods used by the exhibition organizers in their approach to the Khipu by means of a conversation with the restorer Lena Bjerregaard: in a video, the hands of the artist Shahla Safarzadeh were shown producing the calligraphy, and in a film montage, fake blood ran down the Mayan bust in an intimation of a ritual sacrifice.

### **Points of Reference for further Humboldt Lab Work**

The multilayered reading rooms, each dedicated to a single object, were an attempt to demonstrate the variety of interpretations and of information relating to an object. At the same time it was a way of documenting the fact that the final presentation was the result of a cooperative process between exhibition organizers, curators and academics.

The experimental exhibition “Layering Meanings” polarizes in a big way. Advocates defend the cabinets as spatially separate concentrated zones, facilitating a targeted and intensive dialog with just one object outside the usual permanent exhibition. Particularly the design, using a central table, which, alongside individual reading materials and roundtable discussions, was highlighted as a desirable element for future exhibitions. The characterization, “strongholds of curatorial texts” used by a Dahlem curator can be regarded as a succinct summary of all the other critical voices. They felt the object itself was overwhelmed by the quantity of text and passionately claimed that they even had difficulty finding it. Also criticized was the lack of individual authorship – it had simply not been part of the plan and was therefore not noted in the texts. A clear indication of the multiperspectival approach to the exhibition would have been welcome.

The culmination of the idea in its aim of providing as much information about an object as possible, is a



hallmark of the project and continues to make it an intellectual reference point for the Humboldt Lab. The individual cabinets provided a demonstrable contribution to the debate around the design of large quantities of text material in an exhibition context and to the associated question of how long visitors stay within a given exhibition space. Is the offer of extensive reading material willingly accepted or are the in-depth texts read before or after the visit to the exhibition on the website or in the accompanying catalogue, and should they therefore be provided only there? Is it an advantage to be able to see the entire text, instead of swiping through it on a tablet, chunk by chunk? What about the relationship to other media? Do they enrich or hinder one another? “Layering Meanings” was an intensive and pioneering experiment in contextualizing museum objects. The manifold experiences and lessons learned are certainly correct and relevant as far as further Humboldt Lab Dahlem projects are concerned.

<sup>1</sup> The other objects were: Exercise manuscript page, Inv.-no.: IB 13691, 28 x 20,4 cm, calligraphy (paper, ink), Persian; 19th century, Collection Friedrich Spuhler, Acquisition date 1989; Mayan head, Inv.-no.: IV Ca 21664, 28 x 17 x 26 cm, Quen Santo, Guatemala, Eduard Seler, Acquisition date 1899; Khipu, Inv.-no.: V A 42593, 55 x 35 cm, cotton/wool–twisted, Inca; 1400 - 1532, Peru; Site of find: Pachacamac, Wilhelm Gretzer (collector); Julius van der Zypen (patron), Acquisition date 1907.

Agnes Wegner has been managing director of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem since July 2012.

## Layering Meanings / Positions

### The High Quality of the Process

**New questions, multifaceted learning processes and various misunderstandings: the two curators Maria Gaida and Martina Stoye, along with exhibition designer and architect Andreas Heller, in conversation with Martin Heller on the experiment “Layering Meanings.”**  
Recorded by Barbara Schindler

**Martin Heller:** I would like to begin our conversation with, for me, the decisive question: what have you learnt from this project, both good and bad?

**Martina Stoye:** This was the first exhibition project whose concept development was handled externally. We had no influence on which institution would be awarded the commission and simply had to wait. Then the search began for artifacts that were particularly multilayered and on which this aspect could be best demonstrated. This task alone became a pleasure for me – i.e. looking at these objects from this perspective.

Andreas Heller’s team then formulated the questions, which were a real eye-opener to me, because they were questions that would not normally be raised within our historical research discipline. They asked whether or not the Beatles played a role in our museum’s acquisition of a 19th century Krishna painting. Initially shocked, I rejected the idea vehemently, also with my colleagues in mind. That’s when I realized how, in terms of new questioning – and coming from an archeological discipline – one tends to stay within the confines of a traditional scientific discourse. It was refreshing to be confronted with a different sort of questioning. I then pursued the matter, and saw that at the time of the acquisition there certainly had been an increasing interest in Krishna pictures, undoubtedly connected with the Beatles and the upsurge of the Hare Krishna movement in the West.

**M. Heller:** So the project gave you three things: a more open approach, the selection of objects on the basis of non-traditional viewpoints and the new, non-scientific questions posed by Andreas Heller and his team on behalf of the public.

**Stoye:** Yes, those were questions, which went against the grain of what we are accustomed to in our field, but which were also not really solvable given such a short time-frame. Initially, that was a problem for me as a professional.

**M. Heller:** Why?

**Stoye:** Because there is a fear of presenting something to a professional audience before it has been exhaustively researched.



**Andreas Heller:** What do you mean by exhaustively researched? I would argue that there is no such thing. This fear of losing of control! Not just professionals, but also entire museum systems have always believed that this goes hand in hand with loss of quality. But we all know that the process itself is of a high quality. That is why this title was chosen. It is like an onion from which one can continue peeling off layers. Whereby, I don't think one ever reaches the core; one always has to begin anew. I think it's very important to tell the public that scientific research is a process. "Layering Meanings" represents only a small contribution to that idea. Whether or not we have done everything right or well is another question. We could have gone much further.

**M. Heller:** So, your eureka moment was rather a confirmation of what you already knew?

**A. Heller:** Yes, a confirmation to pursue such discussions in museums more intensively in the future.

**M. Heller:** Did you also learn something of which you were not previously aware?

**A. Heller:** What I have learnt during this project is that the effect we aimed for is not wholly understood by the public. Whereby there is always the question of how many people one can reach anyway. Is it enough when 20 percent say they have understood it – or does it have to be 80 or 100 percent?

**M. Heller:** What did you, Ms. Gaida, as a distanced observer learn?

**Maria Gaida:** I wasn't involved in the selection of objects because I wasn't available at the time, but I wish I had been. At some point I was told it would be the Mayan head, because someone – or probably several people – were fascinated by this object. And it really is fascinating. But what makes me really pleased about this project is that in the 44 years that this item has been exhibited I am sure that never before have so many people viewed it so intensively. And that is thanks to this exhibition. But I would not have chosen it for the "Layering Meanings" exhibition – I have said that before – because one knows so little about it.

**M. Heller:** And is there something from the project about which you could say: "I didn't know that beforehand"? We are talking here about "learning."

**Gaida:** No, there isn't really anything. Not for me. But that doesn't mean that there isn't plenty for thousands of others to learn.

**Stoye:** I think we often know a lot that we aren't aware of because the right questions have not been asked. Don't you think? At least that was my experience.

**M. Heller:** That sounds like a worthwhile experience.

**Stoye:** Yes, although I would agree that we should have done more research, gone into things deeper if there had been more time.

**M. Heller:** Researching Indian-influenced fashion of the 1960s isn't necessarily part of your field.

**Stoye:** No, not at all, I am an archeologist after all. But for me it was a very important stimulus. Now, this way of questioning is always present, although, as I said, time is usually too short to fully engage with it.

**A. Heller:** The biggest provocation was this video, where a blood-like liquid runs over the Mayan head. That is an idea that occurred momentarily when we were standing in front of the massive high steles in the entrance area...

**Gaida:** ... which have nothing to do with the Maya.

**A. Heller:** Yes, but they stand directly in front of the Mayan head and depict war and death motifs.

**Stoye:** That often occurs between the public and museum staff: the public sees things – for example war – and thinks of victims. They perceive it on this level, then group it with other objects, order it in a different way. For the curators it is very very difficult to think always in these "simple" perceptive patterns. It would be wonderful if we could combine the two better.

**Gaida:** The reason for that is in part that the exhibition was conceived in the 1960s and is, in principal, still organized in exactly the same as it was 45 years ago. Hardly anything has been improved upon. And so we are not aware that the steles originated in a completely different culture from the head, which you then chose.

**A. Heller:** Is there a trick to enable you as an academic to step back for a moment and see this object in a new



way? Completely forgetting your own biography and viewing it anew?

**Gaida:** There are probably a few things I really cannot view with complete impartiality, although I wouldn't include the Mayan head in that. The fact that you raised the idea of the Mayan head having a link with life and death irritated me initially. There is no intimation of this being the case.

**Stoye:** It is an association.

**Gaida:** Well alright, if those were your associations, because you had seen the steles beforehand, which have nothing to do with it, but for you became associated with each other and so finally the head is presented in that way. I just ask myself, what does the visitor make of it. Because they don't know if that is information based on fact, or simply someone's association – you, Andreas Heller, or someone else's. What conclusions do the viewers draw? Because nowhere does it state that there is an association.

**Stoye:** The topic of authorship was extremely blurred, which has advantages and disadvantages.

**A. Heller:** I agree that we made mistakes. Which also led to the fact that the design was too "finished," although it was meant to have a workshop character.

**M. Heller:** The design expressed the idea: this is the voice of authority.

**A. Heller:** Yes, and precisely that was not our aim.

**Gaida:** But that is exactly how it comes across.

**A. Heller:** The actual theme was contemplation. And that's why you are right when you say authoritarian, because ideally we would have liked to lock the doors! After half an hour we would let you out again. (all laugh)

**M. Heller:** In the end an exhibition was created that had an authoritarian air, although something else was intended. And on the other hand it became a text-based exhibition, which for many had something excessive about it.

**A. Heller:** I would say: text per se is not a bad thing. It's not purely intellectual. But if an entire museum were organized like that, I would say, "That won't do." One other thing is important: we chose the items because they have nothing really to do with each other. For us, the connections were made during the course of working with them, which is, of course, not at all scientific. But pretty amazing. And I like that about museums: that one can create synapses between things that actually don't belong together. But we know that they do actually belong together. Collections that have been brought together coincidentally or to an extent based on ideological motivation, even if consisting of more than half a million items, offer an invitation to play and create new inter-relationships that didn't exist before in the real world. For many people, especially in museums like this one, that is what makes them exciting; for others it's a no-go area.

**M. Heller:** Thank you very much – that was an appropriate summing up!

*Dr. Maria Gaida specialized in ancient American studies, ethnology and prehistory at Hamburg University, gaining her doctorate in 1983. After a traineeship at the Ethnologischen Museum Berlin, she has been curator of the Mesoamerican collection since 1993 and head of the department of collections since 1998. Gaida is also co-publisher of the museum magazine "Baessler-Archiv" and co-author, along with Nikolai Grube, of the book "Die Maya. Schrift und Kunst" (Köln 2006).*

*Andreas Heller, architect from Hamburg, has been designing since the mid-1980s exhibitions and interiors for numerous institutions and museums in Germany. In 1989 he founded the Studio Andreas Heller GmbH, an interdisciplinary planning office for cultural, recreational and educational institutions.*

*Martin Heller is a member of the management board of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem and is responsible for the contextual concept development of the Humboldt-Forum.*

*Martina Stoye has been curator of South and Southeast-Asian Art at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst Berlin since 2008. After curatorial work at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin she took up a post as lecturer on Indian Art History at the Freie Universität Berlin from 1995 to 2001. She subsequently conducted research into Buddhist Gandhara art and in 2007/2008 worked on a major Gandhara exhibition for the Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle Bonn.*



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*This interview was recorded in July 2014 in Berlin.*

## Exhibiting Contexts: But how?

by Daniela Bystron

The Humboldt Lab project “Layering Meanings” was dedicated to information, contexts and the narratives of selected exhibits. The aim of this commentary is to review what method of imparting information lay behind the attempt and how it was implemented. Aspects discussed included: design, multiperspectival views, transparency and authorship.

### Spatial Design

Upon entering the exhibition one stands in front of four massive black cubes. They appear to contradict their stated intention – “achieving the contextualisation of museum objects by making them equally attractive as approachable for the public,” as stated in the museum’s flyer – hermetic and secretive. The cube-like cabinets serve as informational spaces for the selected exhibits: calligraphic manuscript, a Mayan head, Khipu and Picchvai. Black walls, white text – the design is very restrained and dark. The walls are covered with text, similar to a notice board, with few illustrations or photos. In addition, every room has a tabletop printed with writing and images; all items of information are similarly designed and so attain a uniformity, a homogenous surface; only the font size varies.

It is wonderful that the contexts of these objects are given so much space. But is it possible for such static cubes, with their printed walls of information, to really convey the complex content and their relationships with each other? The texts are structured chronologically and hierarchically, but our knowledge is formed as flexible mesh structures. Mind maps, charts and rhizomes could render multilayered contents and their references more effectively.

Although occasionally images, films and an audio station accompany the mainly written information, the information cubes themselves have little experimental or playful character: the option of seeking out more in-depth information oneself, or of contributing one’s own knowledge, commentary or questions is missing. In constructivist pedagogy, amongst other things, the multi-sensory principle is applied; emphasis is placed on the experience of the one learning and on the process of retention of the learner. Not every type of learner<sup>1</sup> likes to read texts; some prefer a medial or interactive method. The objects themselves invite the viewer to become active – for example the calligraphic manuscript, suggests the act of writing, or the Khipu the invention of one’s own messages. Although the tables indicate that one could work here, they serve only as static text and image carriers: ideally one would wish for filing cabinets of index cards, drawers, reference books for additional information or tools for creating one’s own commentary. The positive aspect of analog design is surely the opportunity provided for a deceleration of the viewing process and for the use of tactile sense, which could have been improved on.

### Several Perspectives

“Each of the 500,000 objects collected here in this museum has its own history. We don’t appropriate them but instead try to understand them with the aid of questions (...)” it states in the introductory wall text of “Layering Meanings.” The idea of covering each cube at the entrance with introductory questions invites independent research.<sup>2</sup>

This approach, of acquiring knowledge independently and seeking answers could be boosted through an expansion of the forms for providing information. In order to promote variety and accommodate different learning types the presentation could be organized differently: through a greater variety of media – more objects, films, audio documents, images, illustrations. Through a suspension of an informational hierarchy – web-like, ordered introductory texts, background information and definitions; through an expansion of text types – interviews, commentaries, essays, quotes, comics and portraits.

As previously mentioned, the contextual information has rarely been afforded such a high ranking as in this exhibition. Information about the objects – which is what most visitors demand, as reflected in guest books,



on comment cards and in personal conversations. But how is a museum to deal with these expectations? Should they deliver facts, thus providing an interpretation of an object, or could they perhaps provide a more open and critical sort of contextualization? “Layering Meanings” presents a lot of information that steers the viewer towards the objects, but this could be supplemented, as in British museums, by a multiperspectival approach: about one object, one exhibition or one topic, several people provide their personal or professional point of view. In the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, up to now, one would have had to search in vain for alternative perspectives, critical approaches and post-colonial questions – here, potentially, the Humboldt Lab could provide a suitable stage.

### **Revealing Processes**

Stefan Koldehoff, the arts and culture journalist, quoted a study on information policy at a conference on art education in Münster in 2007. It examined which institutions the public trusts: in first place was the “Tagesschau” (public television news program) and in second place were museums. This granting of trust should be taken seriously and continually reviewed.

The following words at the entrance of “Layering Meanings” signal a transparency of information. “What is that? Where does it come from? What was it for? How did it get here? We ask these questions of the curators and professionals. In this way, as a dialog of questions and answers, a joint voyage is undertaken, leading in turn to new questions and discoveries. It is not results that are shown, but rather the path we have trodden to reach the exhibited objects. They still conceal many puzzles. Our presentation is an invitation to you, to take up the journey from where we left off and to undertake your own journey of discovery.”

As a visitor, one would have liked to have been privy to the question and answer process between the makers, the curators and academics: it would have been fascinating to have been a fly-on-the-wall witness during the search for contexts and different perspectives with regard to the objects. These processes are, unfortunately, not presented clearly enough in the exhibition space – it would also have been useful to be told who, how, and why, certain individuals were included in the knowledge-seeking process, what information the institute has, which it does not, where it needs to draw on the expertise of others or where there is divergence on current historical research.

### **Who is Speaking?**

Authorship is an important question, when it comes to credibility and transparency. If recipients are given an opportunity to decide between several perspectives, they are accepted as mature visitors. With such openness and impartiality with regard to the museum’s collections, one could include such discussion and critical approaches as part of the displays and thus appeal to a more diverse public.

Equally, participative tendencies<sup>3</sup> reflected in methods like user-generated content or co-creative processes, could be incorporated into the communicative practice. In particular, an attempt like “Layering Meanings” could even include empty spaces and tools for the public to express its own opinions.

### **What to do?**

Contexts are good for the objects! If they are then given enough space as they are here, then so much the better. I would like to see more of such spatial data banks; I would also like them to present or invite the use of archive material and information collected by the institution as well as continuing perspectives from outside sources - experts and public. Theoretical or subjective day-to-day items of information create relationships between the objects and those viewing them and in this way they gain a stronger, multi-tonal, social relevance.

In contrast to the current and much quoted study about average lengths of stay in the museum<sup>4</sup>, whose results, among others, showed that, on average, visitors devote only 11 seconds to an object, “Layering Meanings” stresses a focussing and slowing down of the viewing process. The design of a framework to encourage an intensive discourse, exchange and self-generated research are also recommended for the Humboldt-Forum.

“Layering Meanings” has taken on the, up to now, rare form of communicative formats, namely informational and research spaces. For the future Humboldt-Forum I would wish to see more of these space experiments, which test how far they can be implemented visibly in the exhibition space, using complex information and



questions which interact in a transparent, multiperspectival, critical and playful manner with their public.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. David Kolb: *Experiential Learning. Experiences as the Source of Learning and Development*. New Jersey, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Questions on the Mayan head quoted as example: "Where does the head come from? God or human head? A cult object? Why a mask? When was it made? How and with what materials was it made? Who discovered it? What is the fascination with the Mayans? How did the head come to the museum? Still a puzzle?"

<sup>3</sup> Cf. current publications like: Angela Jannelli: *Wilde Museen*. Bielefeld, 2012; Susanne Gesser, Martin Handschin, Angela Jannelli, Sibylle Lichtensteiger (Ed.): *Das partizipative Museum*. Bielefeld 2012; Nina Simon: *The Participatory Museum*. Santa Cruz, CA 2010.

<sup>4</sup> *E-Motion Study* by Martin Tröndle, University of Applied Sciences, Basel, [mapping-museum-experience.com/ergebnisse/kuenstlerische](http://mapping-museum-experience.com/ergebnisse/kuenstlerische) (viewed July, 15, 2013)

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## Layering Meanings / Credits

A project of the Probebühne 1, March 14 through June 23, 2013

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## Layering Meanings / Imprint Documentation

**Publisher:** Humboldt Lab Dahlem, a project of the Kulturstiftung des Bundes and the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (2012-2015). Directors: Martin Heller, Viola König, Klaas Ruitenbeek, Agnes Wegner

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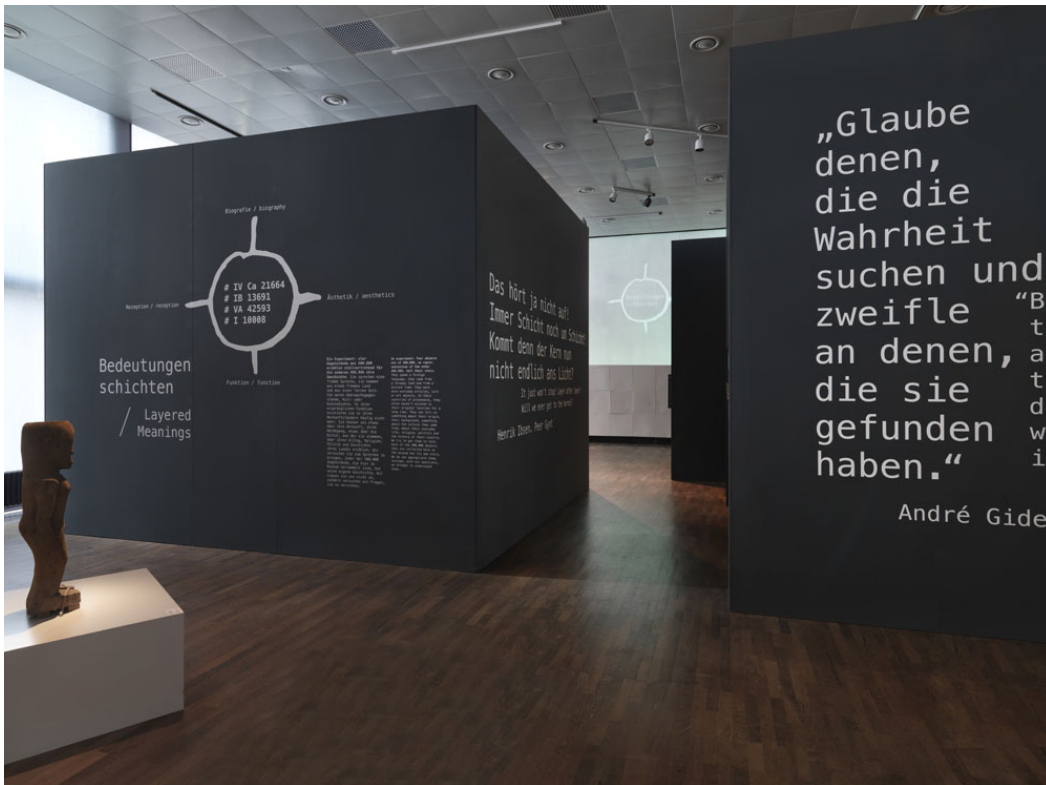
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As of September 2014

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Installation view “Layering Meanings,” photo: Jens Ziehe



“Layering Meanings: Picchvai,” photo: Jens Ziehe



“Layering Meanings: Calligraphy sheet,” photo: Jens Ziehe



"Layering Meanings: Maya head," photo: Jens Ziehe



“Layering Meanings: Khipu,” photo: Jens Ziehe